

**THE
CYPRESS
OF
MONTEREY**

**HISTORIC TREES OF
CALIFORNIA**

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The Cypress of Monterey

An Historical Sketch

BY

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The Lone Cypress of Midway Point

The Cypress of Monterey

An Historical Sketch



THE wonderful old trees of the Monterey Cypress groves have their own power of silent speech. They are full of voices that challenge our knowledge and draw from us many a question—these wrestling survivors of a vanished forest, clinging to the wave-beaten rocks of the Monterey coast.

Are they the remnant of a forest at one time extending farther inland, or are they the last of an army of trees that has battled for ages with the sea? The readiness with which they yield to cultivation the world over suggests that their ancestors had a wider inland range. But these native trees themselves have all the appearance of battered heroes that are holding with a primitive force to their last few yards of earth; and as

one stands at Cypress Point, looking seaward, it does not take great effort of imagination to picture a cypress forest spreading its vigorous, flat, green foliage miles beyond the present shore line, over areas now covered by the ocean. To aid the imagination, there is the jagged coast that bears witness to the rough inroads of the sea, together with the fact that an isolated grove of the same trees is found on the headlands of Point Lobos, on the far side of the deep curve in the coast made by Carmel Bay.

As yet, however, evidence of submerged cypress stumps is wanting; but it is not unreasonable to suppose that they might be found. Off the Atlantic Coast, near Norfolk, Virginia, stumps of the Bald Cypress can be seen, at low tide, a hundred or two feet from the present shore line, indicating that at some time in the past the Bald Cypress flourished in this locality, though it does not grow far in from the shore. Should stumps of the Monterey Cypress be found off this bit of the Pacific Coast, it may be inferred that legions of these old trees have fought their battles with wind and wave on some vanished shore line.

The persistent encroachment of the sea still does effectual work; and, in times of storm, wind



On the Shore of Carmel Bay

and rain work with the waves to tear the trees from their holdings. Anyone who visits Cypress Point from year to year can see how their roots are being wrenched from the rocks; and now and then some veteran is missing. In a whirl through the grove, as an incident in "taking The Drive," this steady wearing away of Cypress territory is not noticeable; nor, perhaps, would a tree be missed from its place unless it chanced to be the victim of a storm that had hurled it across the roadway.

But a ramble through the grove, such as Stevenson must have taken from time to time during his stay in Monterey, gives the friendly touch that these trees invite with their air of "rooted men". Such character as they reveal! Such directness of branching! Such ingenuity in twists and turns and flattened surfaces! Such cabling of rocks with ropes of roots, and such apparent energy in huge, bared arms, with their sharp elbow-turns, that seem poised for a gigantic thrust!

The trees on the westward slope of the Cypress Point grove can be easily distinguished a mile or more away standing out against the sky in marked contrast to the pines of the surrounding country; for their outspread branches with flat

fan-like layers of foliage give a contour altogether different from the contour of the pines with upward pointing branches and tufted foliage. Beyond a treeless edge of coast and a waving stretch of white sand dunes, overlooking the blue ocean, are the first of the cypress trees with their brilliant green—scattered individuals, but the territory belongs to them, and they dominate it with a quiet forcefulness.

Until a few years ago, the grand old Ostrich Tree stood like a warning sentinel on a rocky headland to the right. The "Ostrich" was formed of two of the oldest Cypress trees, that in their common struggle against the winds had grown together in a way that suggested, at a distance, the form of a huge bird with stalking legs and raised head. When the trees were torn apart, in one of the heaviest storms ever experienced on the peninsula, the historic apparition vanished. But, for those who knew the Ostrich, it seems to haunt the stretch of land it once guarded; and on days of drifting fog its gigantic form seems to rise with the mists of the sea and stalk to its place on the shore.

A few yards from the place where the Ostrich Tree was—thus is the locality generally designated—there are crouching cypress trees with

their heavy, green foliage spread out upon the earth. By bowing to the elements they have saved their necks and fared better than the Ostrich, even with its pyramidal structure of locked branches and broad base.

Beyond this exposed headland the cypress trees are congregated and are to be seen in all sorts and conditions—some of them rounded and shapely as beautiful oaks, some of them straight as redwoods and of tapering form; but the trees that dominate the grove are flat-topped and altogether fantastic in their manner of growth.

They range in age from sturdy seedlings to grim old trees that might show two or three centuries of rings in their grey trunks; and scattered through the green vigor of the grove are the ashen skeletons of trees still stretching their knotted arms to the sky or lying where they have fallen, like whitening frames of huge animals. But the green predominates, the richest of green, the cypress green, that shows all the more vivid against stretches of grey rock and blue and white ocean. It is massed overhead in layers or clustered in shrub-like forms a few feet above the ground. Here is shaded light under heavy foliage and springy soil under foot; and here, too, is the mysteriousness that hangs about any bit of old



Cypress Point

forest with those hints of a past only its trees know.

Where the trees grow close enough, a green roof with Gothic-like openings to the sky brings to mind the old association of groves and temples—many of the pillars, to be sure, are deeply ridged and contorted and they branch in contortions; but they somehow straighten themselves enough to carry the green roof at a proper angle. The Cedar of Lebanon, with which a popular rumor has identified the Monterey Cypress, must have yielded better timber for the building of Solomon's temple than could be had from most of these cypress trees. Stevenson, with his eye for the weird, gives them the precedence of all trees for grotesqueness, and this, after he has declared that the pines of Monterey might figure without change in a circle of the nether hell as Dante describes it.

There is the "Ram's Horn" tree with a snarl of twisted arms branching from a trunk that bends close to the ground. It might be mistaken for a stunted growth of short stature instead of a vigorous old tree that has bent, like a wrestling giant, this way and that to hold its own against the wind. Some of these recumbent trees are stretched full length, sixty feet or more, almost

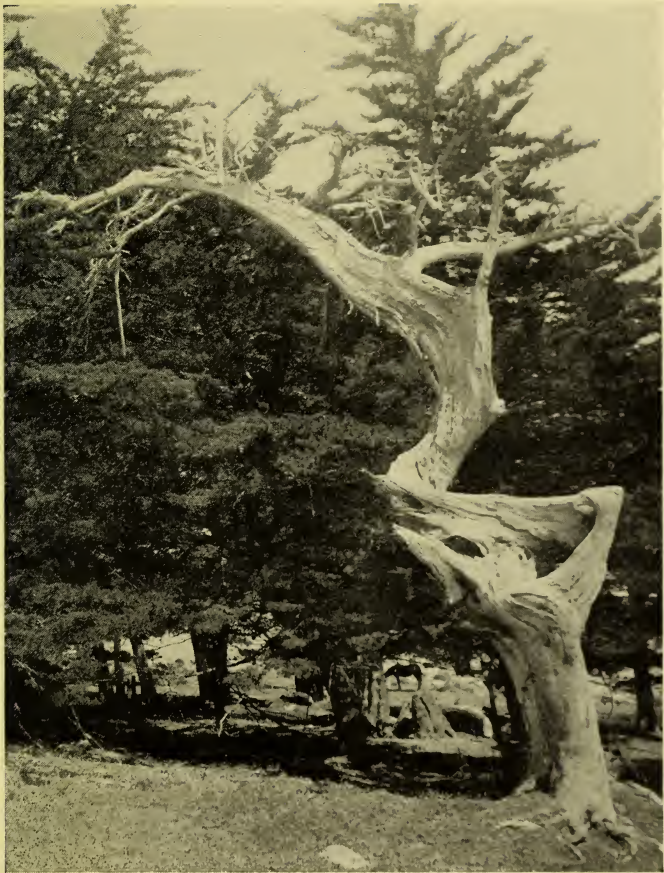
parallel to the earth, and send out vertical branches that have all the appearance of a series of small trees. One of them, lying along a rocky ledge, high above the sea, sends its branches up in the form of a thick hedge; another travels down a steep decline as far as the sea allows, carrying its green branches upright on its back—one fancies, in triumph.

The best known of all the trees of this grove is a lone cypress on Midway Point. It has traversed the world in paintings and photographs and has now appeared on the screen. It stands, indeed, upon a "point," a high point of rock that terminates a narrow stretch of land sweeping with a rising curve straight out from the shore. How as a seedling could it ever have gathered strength enough to grip the rock, this old tree, apparently so nicely balanced on a pinnacle battered on three sides by the sea! It is a shapely tree so far as its form above the earth is concerned—and this in spite of its exposed position—but the convolutions of its bared roots tell of a struggle to hold its rocky citadel. A series of steps worn out of the interlacing roots of the tree leads up the slope to the point, where more roots are to be seen straggling up and down the bare rock in heavy, evenly twisted strands, humped up into

knots, or piercing crevices and tying themselves around sharp corners. One may rest, after the climb, on a rustic bench made of the living fibers of the tree to watch the waves breaking on the rocks below, and—perhaps—sip hot coffee poured from a thermos bottle, and nibble a sandwich; and to this sensuous enjoyment may be added a touch of the companionship a tree can give, an old and experienced tree that for more than three score years and ten has spread its branches to the sun and dew and made its struggle with the winter storms.

Farther in from the shore, with a background of green trees, is the whitened form of an old tree, still standing with such a dignity of line that it seems impossible that some living force does not uphold it. It is suggestive of classic sculpture, so statue-like it is. It might well be called "The Wrestler," a wrestler posed for the sculptor after the contest. The bark has fallen away or has been stripped off by the wind so that the lines of the grain can be traced from the base to the top of the tree in all their fascinating twists and turns; and in these lines can be read something at least of the story of this tree that was.

And there is the "Witch Tree," quite as famous as the Ostrich Tree, still holding firmly



The Ghost Tree

to the rocks; but the winds have torn at the witch's tresses until they are short and sparse, and her draperies have become so scant that the lines of her bony figure are prominent; yet, for all that, she is a witch, for her broomstick is in evidence—for those who know where to find it—and she still clutches it with her bony hand as she rides in the top branches of the tree that bears her name.

There are other trees as remarkable as those that have been named, rising out of the rocks of the steep declivities in almost inaccessible places or growing on the inland slopes. The grove contains in all about ten thousand trees, and extends, according to Professor Jepson's estimate, about two miles along the coast and an eighth of a mile inland; and among the trees scattered on the rocks at Point Lobos are still other wonderful old trees that show the same indomitable spirit in contending with the wind and the waves.

It seems that science, as well as the United States Government, was active on the Peninsula of Monterey in the year 1846. During this year, the year that Commodore Sloat raised the American flag over the Custom House, the Monterey Cypress was introduced scientifically

to the world as *Cupressus Macrocarpa*, a newly discovered member of the family of conifers. Karl Hartweg, who classified it from specimens found near Carmel, thought the cones so exceptionally large for a cypress that he called it "macrocarpa" (large-fruited), probably comparing the cones with those of the little Gowen Cypress that grows on Huckleberry Hill, which he discovered the same year, and forgetting the big cones of the Italian cypress. Large Monterey cones measure an inch and three-quarters in length, and about an inch and a half through. While even these may be inconspicuous, the green fruit is remarkably beautiful, massed in the foliage in heavy, glossy, bronze clusters. An entranced botanist might well have remembered such clusters when he named the Monterey Cypress.

Hartweg's classification stands, though seeds had been sent to England a few years previous to 1846, and the tree had been given the name "Lambertiana," in honor of the English botanist. During this critical period in Pacific Coast history the cypress groves must more than once have been observed and commented upon by navigators who tarried in Monterey Bay and explored the peninsula for various reasons.

In the little botanical garden of the Pacific Grove Museum there is a cypress tree that suggests the possibility of an earlier classification than the one recorded, commemorating the landing of the French navigator, Jean Francois La Pérouse, at Monterey in 1786 on his voyage of exploration around the world. It seems possible that trees so conspicuously located did not escape the notice of his scientists who explored the vicinity to a certain extent. In the wreck of the expedition off the coast of the New Hebrides the greater part of the records were lost, some of them, doubtless, relating to the plant life of the Monterey Coast, if we may judge from reports sent by La Pérouse to the French Government from the Port of Monterey.

Small as is the native growth of the Monterey Cypress it has been so widely cultivated that it can be found in parks and gardens and country stretches almost anywhere on the earth. Sometimes, however, it is clipped and twisted into forms that nature's trees know not, huge green baskets, globes, arches, triangles and what-nots that the sage old trees of Monterey would never recognize as their progeny. Its elastic branches know how to yield and to endure—"Sweet is the cypress, but its rind is tough." When the trees

are grown in a hedge the branches lock themselves so snugly that no concrete wall could be firmer; and for a windbreak, what trees could have a better inheritance than the descendants of these wind-tried veterans of the Monterey Coast! That their enduring and protective qualities are appreciated is highly apparent. How many a stretch of land is bordered by them on the windward side, and how many a shanty on some barren bit of earth stands under their spreading branches!

Strange that the cypress, originally symbolical of life, vigor and immortality, should ever have come to be known as the "funereal cypress"!—one of those subversions that association and suggestion bring about in human minds. The *Cupressus Sempervirens*, the classic cypress of the old world, was known for its longevity centuries before it was distinguished by the botanist as *Sempervirens* (1753). According to an old Greek myth, Apollo immortalized Cuparissos, a youth who was dear to him, by changing him at his death into this long-lived tree, commonly known today as the Italian Cypress.

The giant Sequoias, now known as the oldest living things on earth, were undreamed of by the Greeks who fashioned the pretty myth that

has made the cypress for ages a symbol of immortality; but the ancient name Cupressus, given by modern science to all trees of the Cypress group honors the hero of the myth in a way also undreamed of by the poetic Greeks.

There has been much speculation as to the age of the older native Monterey Cypress trees. Many of them look world-worn enough to warrant popular estimates of a thousand years or more; and perhaps the fact that California is the home of the oldest trees on earth accounts to some extent for this extravagance of opinion. But fallen trees at Cypress Point have left the records of their rings to tell how long they lived on the earth.

A massive stump belonged to a tree a few years over three centuries old when it fell. Other trees had fallen at ages between two and three hundred years; but all were twisted and storm-beaten and doubtless as old as any of the living trees.

During two or three centuries of a life face to face with the sea winds, turning from them and whirling back again to defy them or bending under them, a Cypress of the Monterey coast could never grow into a tree with the stately form of its very near relative, the historic

Italian Cypress, living under less trying conditions for a century or two longer, and gaining, at times, a height of one hundred and fifty or two hundred feet.

Yet the Monterey Cypress, fifteen to seventy-five feet in height, is by far the largest of all the California Cypresses, the three or four others being more like shrubs than like trees.

Hosts of vigorous seedlings show that it is strongly inclined to preserve itself as a species; so there seems little doubt, if nature has her way, that old trees will be replaced as they go down in storms or are washed away by the sea. Replaced? Numerically, yes, but of the old tree the old saying holds—"The place thereof shall know it no more."

When these supple little seedlings with their straight, green leaders have become rugged trees with flattened crowns and powerful arms, more may be known about this unique assemblage of trees; for the rocks tell tales that fire the fancy, and fancy may light the way to fact.

Were their ancestors living on the Greenland coast before the glacial period? Perhaps. How did these late descendants reach the Monterey coast? How? Have they been here as long as the coast Redwoods? Who knows?

Because the rocks have not yet made answer to questions such as these we have mythical accounts telling of seeds that were brought centuries ago from the Orient, carried from China to the coast in junks, or set afloat on the ocean by Japan; but there is not a Monterey Cypress on the coast across the sea today to nod assent.

This "arboreal island" of Monterey Cypress, with other such islands of trees, on the California coast, may be, so science has suggested, but a vestige of a great forest that slipped into the ocean when the Pacific coast was being modeled in the long ago.

But the past of these ancient groves remains a mystery; and the Lone Cypress still questions us from the rocky point high above the seas.

